

Caring starts at home



From our guest contributor, Michele Borba.

Simple ways to help kids learn the power of giving and and grow into caring individuals

It's no secret that kids learn best by doing. But they're also keen observers as well as little copycats. I constantly hear from parents that they want their kids to grow up to be caring and giving individuals. But it's not enough to merely get the kids involved in giving back opportunities, it's essential that you (as the parent) lead by example.

In fact, one of the easiest ways to boost our children's character development is by providing them with the example or model you hope they copy. Our kids arrive with a huge built-in advantage: research shows children are hard-wired at birth to become empathic. All we need to do is provide the right opportunities and examples to help them "catch" the spirit of giving.

What I mean is, if your kids show an interest in a volunteer opportunity, make sure you go with them. They need to see you

participating in the act of giving itself. By seeing you and the joy you get in giving back, you help them grow into caring individuals.

Make sure you also share your experience: "I worked at the soup kitchen. I can't tell you how great it made me feel to give out meals. The people were so grateful!" It's amazing to see kids catch that joy. My husband and I raised our three boys this way and we're quite proud of how they've turned out.

Sometimes taking the first step is the hardest part, so start simple. Look for local opportunities, which might be as close as next door. If you have an elderly neighbor, propose that one Saturday morning you all go over as a family and help clean up the yard. Or around the holidays, volunteer your family to serve food at a local food shelter. What counts is the moment when the recipient states his appreciation. Your child suddenly recognizes he or she made a difference on someone's life, the hero within awakens and the joy of giving begins.

Another option is to find opportunities linked to your kids' passions. If your son or daughter loves animals, get involved as a family at your local animal shelter by playing with the animals on a monthly basis. If your child likes to perform, have them go read or play an instrument at a senior center. The secret is to follow your child's lead. That way your child will be more motivated to volunteer and you just may find him or her taking charge.

If you'd like, you can ask the parents of your child's classmates to volunteer along with your family. Or even invite their family. My husband and I started the tradition of delivering presents to needy families in our community during the holidays with our three boys and their best friends and parents. To this day all of our kids – and their friends – say it was one of their fondest holiday memories. (One of my son's friends even wrote about the experience on his college essay

describing it as “transforming” and even thanked his dad for the opportunity of learning how it felt to give back. You just never know!)

Children learn by watching and they watch their parents more closely than anyone. You don't have to be extremely creative (although that can never hurt). Just be engaged *with* your kids. What's important is that:

- 1) You're recognizing the giving potential in your child
- 2) You're showing your child that you too care about the world around you

Those are sure-fire ways to boost the odds that your kids are going to grow up to be altruistic.

It sounds a little cliché, but clichés exist for a reason, I guess. Truly, in addition to talking the talk as a parent and getting your kids excited about giving back, you need to walk the walk and volunteer with them .

So here's my challenge to you. Ask yourself, “*If my kids had only my example to watch would they be catching a “giving spirit”?*”

If not, it may be time to tune up your own behavior. After all, the kids are watching!

Let's make sure what they watch is what you hope they copy.

Learn more about character education.